JACK STOTTS MEMORIAL SERVICE

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In his little book *And God Created Laughter*, Conrad Hyers says that it used to be the custom in small Eastern Orthodox parishes, for members of the congregation to return to the church on the Monday after Easter, to tell and listen to jokes. The idea was that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God had pulled such a wonderful joke on Satan, that one of the ways Easter should be celebrated is the telling of jokes, and laughter.

People of deep faith know that. People who live in the love of a Risen Lord, live with a lightness, a joy that

regularly becomes delightful laughter. People of deep faith, I have observed, seem to have a twinkle in their eye. It was no less an authority than Phyllis Diller who once was asked about the source of her humor and answered "once you have the question of death resolved — you're free to laugh."

Jack Stotts had a twinkle in his eye. He was a great story teller. Some of my favorites are his. I heard him tell them several times. And so, in Jack's honor . . .

This one requires a little understanding of Reformed Theology and history — so you can only tell it at affairs like this. A Presbyterian Elder dies — and to his great surprise goes to hell. It's terrible. It's everything the

advertisements said it would be: fire and brimstone and torment and sulphur fumes. It's awful. The first thing he sees is a figure sitting in a chair — he's wearing a black robe and Geneva Tabs, he has a long beard. It's John Knox. "Mr. Knox," the Elder says — "what are you doing here?"

"Ask him" — Knox says, pointing to the man sitting next to him. He also has a long beard, a black gown, a peculiar cap — it's John Calvin. "Mr. Calvin — what in the world are you doing here?" the Elder asks.

"Ask him" — Calvin gruffly says, pointing to another stout man, with a funny haircut. Sure enough, it's Martin Luther. "Mr. Luther, I can't believe this — after all you did, the Protestant

Reformation, 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God,' Justification by Faith — what in the world are you doing here in hell?" Luther frowned, lowered his gaze, and said "Works Count."

Jack had a twinkle in his eye, and the easy grace of someone who has big issues resolved.

He was a kind and good friend to so many. It was to Jack one knew one could go with a problem, a worry, a challenge. I met him first when he was serving as Interim Pastor of this congregation after Elam Davies', his great friend's, retirement. During the laborious and sometimes tedious process by which the Presbyterian Church calls a pastor, Jack became my support system and comfort. When it

was all over and we were on our way to Chicago, Jack invited us to dinner on our first night in Chicago, and it was a warm and wonderful experience. When, after a few months I hit a road bump, I called him and asked for an appointment. "I'll come to you" he said, and we sat in the living room of the manse and he listened and we talked and the road bump was smoothed out.

The congregation loved him. He and Virginia had been part of Fourth Presbyterian Church since their student days at McCormick Theological Seminary. When they returned to Chicago when Jack joined the faculty, they resumed the practice of regular worship here. And happily, the Session invited Jack to be the interim when a beloved pastor retired — a time of

important transition that is not always a happy or positive one. Jack preached regularly. Led the staff. Everyone loved him. He was, in my mind, the quintessential Presbyterian minister. A preacher-theologian, a scholar-pastor, who loved and understood the church. All the while, he continued his duties as President of McCormick. In an interview with Don Allerton, for our Oral History Project, Jack said: "I was working full-time as President of McCormick Seminary, and full-time as Interim Pastor, and I found it to be one of the most fulfilling years of my life, because they fit each other."

Later, when I needed to be away for most of a year, we invited Jack and Virginia, newly retired, to come back — we called him "Theologian in

Residence" because the Presbyterian Church is obsessive about what you call people. But he was the preacher again, the scholar-pastor.

Both of those times were very important in the life of this church. And we — all of us here — are, and will always be, deeply grateful for Jack Stotts' faithful ministry. If the Presbyterian Church had Saints, he would be one of them.

He was, as Cynthia has remembered, generous in his devotion to the larger church. When a group of pastors of larger congregations wanted to get together regularly — we asked Jack to be our theologian. He agreed immediately, and twice a year, met with us, taught us, fed us.

When the Presbyterian Church seemed to be turning to the right, becoming more theologically narrow and exclusive about ordination, Jack immediately aligned himself with an organization called the Covenant Network, to advocate for a more generous and inclusive Presbyterian Church. He was President of Austin Seminary in Texas at the time. His position was not, I am sure, universally popular.

He was not only gentle and pastoral, he was strong as steel when it came to the core values of his deep faith. With quiet eloquence, he took on some of our church's harshest internal critics, in one of the best speeches I've ever heard. His academic specialty was

Ethics — and he was a consistent and faithful advocate for a church and a Christian lifestyle honestly reflective of the love and justice, compassion, selflessness, and radical inclusiveness of Jesus Christ.

Jack and Virginia sat in their pew in this church and participated in one of our most precious traditions. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper and the elements have been distributed, the Elders and Deacons are brining the empty trays down the aisle to the Communion Table, the congregation recites the 23rd Psalm. We all know the words by heart. The words, that is to say, live in our hearts. I like to remember that Jack shared, with the ministers of this church, the great privilege of presiding at the table, and

sitting behind the table watching, as the simple liturgy is played out, and listening as the voices of a thousand people fill the reverent silence:

“The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures
He leadeth me beside the still waters

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil,
for thou art with me,
thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.”

We don’t know the historic context out of which those words were written. What is clear, is that the poet had been in something he called the valley of the shadow of death. Maybe it was a crushing military defeat, maybe he was in exile — separated from his home and family, unsure that he would ever see them again, maybe he was a prisoner, maybe the dearest love of his life had died. Whatever the context, he was standing where we find ourselves occasionally, in the valley of the shadow.

That is why the words are so important to us — why we keep them in our hearts.

I will fear no evil. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, I will not fear, for thou art with me.

That is the good news that sustained God's people across the centuries — no matter what happened to them, defeat, exile, destruction of the Temple and Holy City, dispersal, ghettos, pogrom, holocaust — the Lord is my shepherd.

Even in the valley I will fear no evil.

And, when one of God's people, a young Jewish rabbi — taught and healed and comforted and reached out to touch and to include and welcome — all, even the most marginalized, his followers became convinced that the very love of

God, which sustained God's people, was alive and present in him.

And even, when he died, on a cross, he kept demonstrating and expressing the amazing love of God.

Death did not defeat him. The death of Jesus did not countermand the loving presence of God in the valley. Quite the opposite. Because of what happened in the morning of the First Day of the week, they became more convinced than ever that death had been overcome, that life, and love — God's love —have the last word about us.

And so, a few years later, St. Paul could ask —

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” and then list all those experiences that so threatened the first Christians — hardship, distress, persecution, famine, sword: literally inviting us to create our own list — sickness, debilitation, aging, the valley of the shadow of death.

“No,” Paul said: to the contrary — in all of these we are more than conquerors through the one who so loves us.

Nothing — nothing in all creation, not even death, will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

We remember and give thanks for the good life of Jack Stotts today. And we remember and give thanks for the

Good News of Jesus Christ to which Jack gave his life.

I/we will always remember Jack when we hear the words of the Brief Statement of Faith — given to us by Jack and a group he so ably led —

The first words, from the tradition:

“In life and death we belong to God,”

and then these . . .

“Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child,
like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home,
God is faithful still.”

That is the Good News —
God is faithful still.

God loved Jack Stotts while he lived
God loves him now.

Thanks be to God.